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[A-Z INDEX](#) • [SITE MAP](#)

[CONTACT US](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [MOST WANTED](#) | [NEWS](#) | [STATS & SERVICES](#) | [SCAMS & SAFETY](#) | [JOBS](#) | [FUN & GAMES](#)

Stories


[Home](#) • [News](#) • [Stories](#) • 2010 • February • [Team Approach to Art Crime, Part 2](#)

[Twitter](#)
[Facebook \(1\)](#)
[Share](#)

Art Crime

A Team Approach, Part 2

02/05/10



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When the Baghdad Museum in Iraq was looted in 2003 and ancient, priceless antiquities from the cradle of civilization went missing—some, perhaps never to be seen again—it was a sobering moment for the art world and for law enforcement.

"We realized then that we needed a group of agents who were specially trained in the area of stolen and looted art," said Bonnie Magness-Gardiner, who manages our Art Theft Program.

So in 2004, we established an art crime team, which has since recovered—and returned—millions of dollars' worth of objects and cultural property. The

13 agents on the team investigate a variety of art crimes, from high-profile heists to insurance frauds, forgeries, and the looting and sale of religious and historical antiquities that have cultural significance far beyond their dollar value.

Here's a look at a few members of the team and some of their cases:

- For the past eight years, Special Agent Geoff Kelly in our Boston office has been the lead investigator on the 1990 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum theft, the largest property crime in U.S. history. The two men who robbed the museum gained access to the building dressed as police officers. Once inside, they overpowered security guards, tied them up with duct tape, and proceeded to steal 13 objects valued at \$500 million. In addition to Degas sketches and Rembrandt works, they took a Vermeer painting that was one of only 35 in existence. Leads come in on a weekly basis, and Kelly is confident that one day the case will be solved. "The theft captured the public's imagination because it was daring," he said. "But in the end, it's still a theft, and the criminals need to be held accountable."
- Special Agent David Kice in our Santa Fe office joined the Bureau nearly 15 years ago. Because of his prior training as an archaeologist, he was able to provide invaluable assistance on a recent major case. Last June, agents working in conjunction with the Bureau of Land Management arrested more than 20 people in Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico on charges of illegal trading of Native American antiquities. The result of the two-year undercover operation? "Literally thousands of Southwestern and Native American artifacts were seized and recovered," Kice said. "We hope this case puts a dent in the illicit trade in Native American antiquities in the Southwest."
- Special Agent James Wynne is one of the most experienced and respected members of the team. Working out of our New York office, Wynne has solved dozens of art crime cases during his career, and along the way developed extensive contacts throughout the art world. His most recent case involved an Andy Warhol work—a silkscreen on a wooden crate mimicking a case of Heinz ketchup—valued at \$220,000. Last November, the former employee of an art collector was charged with selling the stolen work. The employee told the buyer the piece had been a gift from his uncle. "With so much money at stake in these cases," Wynne explained, "there is no end to fraud."

Which is why the art crime team is busier than ever. "We've had many successes in our first five years," Magness-Gardiner said, "and we'll continue to do this important work in conjunction with our partners."

Resources:

- Native American artifacts case
- The "Heinz 57" case
- Art Crime: A Team Approach, Part 1

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[Facebook \(1\)](#)
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Story Index

By Date

By Subject

- Art Theft
- Civil Rights
- Counterterrorism
- Crimes Against Children
- Criminal Justice Information Services
- Cyber Crimes
- Director/FBI Leadership
- Field Cases
- Foreign Counterintelligence
- General
- History
- Intelligence
- International
- Lab/Operational Technology
- Linguist/Translation Program
- Major Thefts/Violent Crime
- Organized Crime/Drugs
- Partnerships
- Public/Community Outreach
- Public Corruption
- Recruiting/Diversity
- Responding to Your Concerns
- Technology
- Training
- White-Collar Crime